Published in C. Wegener; & N. Meier (Eds.), In Praise of Creative Detours. Untidy Stories about Academic Work and Life. Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture, pp. 1-6, 2017, which should be used for any reference to this work

Staying on topic: doing research between improvisation and systematisation

Constance de Saint-Laurent, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

Doing scientific research is, in theory, a systematic and well-organised enterprise. Field works are planned, interview guides are prepared, participants are selected. And, if the job was done well, data is collected, analysed, interpreted in a proper, clean, scientific manner. In reality, however, things often go astray: field works get cancelled, interviews get side-tracked and participants drop out. The investigation of human lives, as it turns out, cannot do away with the messiness of human lives. In such cases, researchers must adapt to the new situation and yet to stay on topic: in one word, they need to improvise. How, then, does research remain scientific? In this chapter, I will argue that it is not planning, organisation or control that make good academic work, and that it is often in the unexpected that the most interesting results emerge. What matters, however, is what is done afterwards; how hunches and surprises are turned into systematic investigations, analyses and interpretations. This argument will be illustrated with the story of an 'impromptu' fieldwork in Brussels and its unpredictable consequences; or, rather, how staying on topic requires one to systematically stray away from it.

Key words: Qualitative interviews, Improvisation, Systematisation, Collective memory

It's a cold afternoon of March, as winter refuses to give away to spring. I'm sitting in a café in the centre of Brussels, and luckily, crowded as it is, it is warm enough. But it is loud. So very loud, as loud as it was quiet when I discovered the place a week before and decided to use it for my interviews. Luckily, my interviewee is a "sound guy", as I understand it, and he explains to me how I can "clean" my tape. I feel a bit reassured, but I don't like all this "last minute", all this… improvisation. This is not what academic work should look like, I think, as I go through my quickly put together interview guide. I know what I'm looking for, but I'm not sure how to find it. I want to know how he understands history, how he relates to it, and how he came to understand it in this way. It means, sometimes, moving a bit away from the topic. But it doesn't matter, people often talk about history when they realise it the least. As the interview goes on, I regain confidence. This is good data, I think. And I look professional enough, like I know what I'm doing. That is, until Boris tells me, half amused half reproachful:

"So, we were supposed to talk about history, and we spoke geopolitics, then philosophy, and now we are talking international finance, so we are not talking about your topic at all!"

I'm thrown off. There is an air of "are you making me waste my time?", of "do you even know what you're doing?". I laugh; I say it's very fine for me, that I am getting interesting data. So as long as he is not getting bored, all is good. But I spend the rest of the interview struggling to show Boris that we are staying on topic, even if it doesn't matter for my interview. And I wonder, as I finish the interview, how did I get there, turning my carefully crafted project into such an improvisation?

The story

It started as the most amazing opportunity I could have dreamt of. I wanted to study the development of collective memory – our "biased" representations of history (Wertsch, 2002) – in teenagers, and how specific educative interventions may encourage them to challenge the 'glorious' representations their country has of its past. As generations of citizens were, at the time, getting ready in the UK to "get [their] country back", as they are

now ready to "make America great again", educating young generations in a way that encourages them to think critically about their country and its past seemed like a pressing issue. I was aware that it would, however, require long and careful planning to create a study able to explore both the development of collective memory and how teenagers can be introduced to alternative accounts of the past. This is when I was offered the perfect opportunity: a one month all paid fieldwork in Brussels, where I would go observe daily workshops organised with teenagers, where they would be asked about their relation to history and introduced to critical ideas about it. If it sounds too beautiful to be true, it's because it was. I am deeply grateful to the team that welcomed me in Brussels, and to those who made it possible for me to get there. But it sounded so perfect that I forgot to ask questions and to check what was going to happen. I had the absolute certainty that I knew what I was doing and that it was going to go perfectly well, if anything because someone else had thought out this fieldwork for me.

The first shock came when I arrived at the theatre where the workshops were to take place. Misunderstandings, wrong documents, cultural differences: the result was the same; the students were on holidays half of my stay in Brussels and would not be taking part in any workshops. The second surprise? When I was told that the workshop were not so much on history then they were introductions to a theatre play the students were about to see. I knew they were organised around a play, but it had sounded so far as if they were merely "associated" to it, because both were on a historical theme. By the third shock, I was getting desperate: the small, intimate workshops that I had imagined, favouring reflexivity and critical thinking turned out to be one hour time slots with around 80 high schools students. The students were excited and loud, the workshops short and fast paced. They were introduced to a few historical and geographical concepts indeed, but just enough for them to understand the play they were about to see. And the students were asked to participate, to create "timelines of their lives" and "subjective maps of the world", but they would only hand out the finished product, after working on it individually. In hindsight, there are many things I could have done with it. But, on spot, I was lost. How do I interact with the students? The workshops would go by so fast, so loud, being so crowded; I didn't have time to create any rapport. So I took notes, copious notes, of what I could see. And I collected dozens upon dozens of timelines and personal maps from the students who agreed to give them to me. But it was little, very little: there was not much to observe of the students, and not much to say about timelines and maps for which I had no explanation.

Most of the workshops I could observe had passed already, and the holidays were coming up, meaning that I had an almost two weeks break with nothing to do. The play was still running, though, a perfect example of reflexive and critical use of history. This is when I decided to improvise, to seize any opportunity I could fine. I was not going to waste my time when I did have the ideal workshop (the play) and plenty of participants (the audience). And if I couldn't access teenagers and study collective memory as it develops, I could still interview people about their "past about the past". In the next few days, I ran around to print business cards, find a place to do my interviews (that I thought was quiet, but it turned out it was just the holidays), recruit participants, prepare an interview guide, test it and update it.

People agreed to participate, people dropped out, but all in all, I managed to interview seven people in 10 days. The interviews went well, and most participants were benevolent, even when they could see I was not completely sure where I was going. I asked people about their relation to history, how they talked about it at home when they were young,

how it evolved in time, and how they understood the world. It became clear, with every passing interview, that people's relation to history is deeply related to how they see the world. I improvised every day, adapting the interview guide after each interview, depending on what was new, what was failing and what was interesting. It was exciting, fascinating, but I was pretty sure that it was not science. A good introduction to my PhD, maybe, but nothing more. And as Boris told me in his interview, for it is how I interpreted his remark about how I had left the interview stray away from topic, it could be nothing more.

Interlude

It took me almost a year of transcribing and analysing the data to see how interesting the interviews were on their own, not just as an introduction to a subsequent research. As it should be the case (Valsiner, 2014), the questions evolved with the data, interests changed and issues were redefined. As a result, new field works emerged, new theories were proposed. And until I started writing this paper, I actually had forgotten what it was that I was so convinced I would find in Brussels. Below is what study now looks like, in a manner similar to how it has been presented in the scientific publications that followed (de Saint-Laurent, in press a, in press b).

The science

Collective memory – the lay representations of history – has been shown to encourage the glorification of the past of the group by proposing biased and one-sided perspectives on history (Wertsch & Batiashvili, 2012). These narratives are then mobilised in public discourses to defend, for instance, conflicts (e.g., Nicholson, 2016), exclusion (e.g., de Saint-Laurent, 2014), and discriminations (e.g., Favero, 2010). Understanding how some people come to challenge hegemonic representations of the past is thus a critical issue. However, current research on collective memory has been blind to these questions, mainly because it has primarily focused on group dynamics and showed little interest in how people relate to history. This study thus aims to answer two questions: 1) how do people develop a specific relation to the past and 2) how do they come to challenge existing representations of history?

To answer these questions, nine semi open interviews were conducted with artists and intellectuals around a theatre play on the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict (Rosenstein, 2014) in March 2014 in Belgium and in June 2015 in Switzerland. Participants included seven spectators of the play and two members of the theatre team, in their late twenties to mid fifties. They were chosen because of the highly critical nature of the play, offering the advantage of making it very likely that the participants were themselves critical about history, as it is clearly how the play was advertised (and as it turned out to be the case). Participants were interviewed on their relation to history, how this relation evolved through time, what types of resources they had used and with whom they had talked about it. The interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes and were all conducted in French. They were then transcribed using Sonal and coded in Nvivo.

The analysis of the data aimed at reconstructing the trajectories of the participants in their relation to history, what I have termed elsewhere "trajectories of remembering" (de Saint-Laurent, in press a; de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press). To do so, a life narrative analysis was used (Rosenthal, 1993): the interviews were cut into sections corresponding to the different periods of the participants lives and then reorganised in chronological order. Then, for each section, the tools used, the interlocutors referred to, the stories told about history and elements "metamemory" – the participants general understanding of how collective memory works (de Saint-Laurent, in press b) – were coded. Once all the periods

had been analysed, a final layer of analysis was added by focusing on 1) the changes between periods of life, 2) what may have provoked them and 3) the integrations between these different periods (e.g., how perspectives developed at different moments in life can be integrated in a general metamemory in adulthood), using a Life-Course analysis (Zittoun, 2006, 2012).

Three full cases studies were developed from the data, presented in two separate articles and focusing on different aspects of the interviews (de Saint-Laurent, in press b, in press a). So far, the results have suggested that people develop a unique relation to history through the relationships they forge, the (intellectual) resources that become available to them and the evolving contexts they are part of. These relations are often characterised by tensions: between what one learns in school and hears at home; between what was acceptable in a previous context and suddenly is not anymore; between what they had thought to be true their whole life and what a recent encounter just shattered. Each personal relation to history, then, reflects how the person managed – or not – to integrate or navigate the contradicting historical accounts available in their environment. If we are all, in one way or another, exposed to alternative accounts of the past (de Saint-Laurent, 2014), what matters is how we can make sense of such contradictions and mobilise them to develop a reflexive perspective on what happened. Two subsequent studies are planned to test these conclusions: the first one, which took place last year, aimed at looking at the microgenetic processes in place when people encounter alternative versions of the past (de Saint-Laurent, in preparation), while the second one, in preparation, will look at which tools are most effective to help people make sense of these often contradicting stories.

Epilogue

In this chapter, I have tried to present as two separate discourses, two central aspects of research that yet are often considered at odds with each other. On the one hand, "the story" presented the subjective narrative of my fieldwork, that reflected "what happened" from my perspective. This is, as often, a story of improvisation, because no amount of preparation can allow us to predict what exactly is going to happen in a fieldwork – although it can, luckily, prevent many of the "surprises" this impromptu fieldwork led to. On the hand, "the science" presents a clear, logical and chronological version of the study, even if never happened like that. But it offers a systematic and scientific account of the questions the data can answer and how it answers them. Paradoxically, it is full of technical descriptions and yet doesn't say much about how the research was actually conducted. This is, I believe, because scientific discourse is not about reporting how things were done, but about convincingly communicating what can be said about a certain phenomenon under study (see for instance Billig, 2013 for a similar argument).

It could be tempting, depending on the vision we have of science, to consider one of the two discourses proposed in this chapter as more true than the other, as more valuable. From a naturalist or positivist perspective, "the story" is nothing more than a literary endeavour. From a constructionist perspective, "the science" is nothing more than an artifice, a pretty way of presenting things to make us feel like we know what we are talking about. I believe there is much to be gained by integrating both, by considering that science is done halfway between improvisation and systematisation. On the one hand, improvisation is necessary because studying human life is a messy adventure, and trying to do away with it is running the risk of missing the most interesting parts: what participants, communities and often the data itself have to say about the phenomenon we are trying to study. On the other hand, systematisation is necessary for the development of scientific knowledge. How to reach "the truth" about the world and its inhabitants is still very much

a topic of disagreement in the humanities and social sciences (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009), but all would probably agree that systematising how we produce knowledge and the data on which this knowledge is based is one of the keys to answering this question. Developing strategies to consistently analyse data, construct new theories or conduct research is our safeguard against the "everything goes" constructionists are so often accused of. And it is by improvising that we can remain both open to what the world actually has to say and creative about how to explore it.

If this is also an epistemological debate – as in a way all methodological questions are – then a mid way between naturalism and constructionism has been proposed already, under the name of pragmatism. From a pragmatist perspective, what is true, what makes scientific knowledge, is what "works" in practice to help us reach our aims (James, 1922; Pierce, 1877). In many ways, then, scientific research is a craft (Brinkmann, 2012), and as any craft it requires both to build on existing sets of rules and to adapt to the new conditions (Glaveanu, 2014). By insisting on one aspect over the other, we run the risk of either sterilising scientific debate or ignoring what has worked in the past. In the first case, we limit science to "sanitised" studies that reproduce works that have already been accepted by the community. In the second case, we at best perpetually reinvent the wheel, at worst we risk falling in old pitfalls that could easily have been avoided and may have a tremendous impact on the people we study. Studying racism without building on post-colonial research runs the risk of falling back into paternalism; studying mental illness and ignoring research on its social construction can led to the reification of problematic categories; and at a more theoretical level, studying everyday thinking and overlooking the work done on social representations can easily send us back to Le Bon's barbarian hordes (de Saint-Laurent, 2015). Scientific research, then, requires to both systematically build on what has been before and to improvise in order to go beyond what we thought could be done and actually produce useful knowledge.

When I transcribed Boris' interview, a few months after it took place, I found none of the reproachfulness I heard on the day. What I heard, instead, was an interviewee trying to show me that he, too, knew what we were talking about, that he remained "on top" of the topic. In the end, I had tried so much to look professional that some interviewees reacted by insisting on how much they knew about the topic at hand, rather than answering the questions asked. By focusing too much on dressing and sounding like what I thought participants would expect of a scientist, I forgot, at times, to build a rapport with them. This is a mistake I hope I will not do again. In the meantime, I will enjoy the comfort of finally doing my interviews in a T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

References

Billig, M. (2013). *Learn to write badly. How to succeed in the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press.

Brinkmann, S. (2012). Qualitative research between craftsmanship and McDonaldization. A keynote address from the 17th Qualitative Health Research Conference. *Qualitative Studies*, *3*(1), 56–68.

Cornish, F., & Gillespie, A. (2009). A Pragmatist Approach to the Problem of Knowledge in Health Psychology. *Journal of Health Psychology*, *14*, 800–809. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105309338974

de Saint-Laurent, C. (in preparation). Historical reasoning. Sources and resources to understand history. *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science*, (Special issue: Uses of the past. History as a resource for the present).

de Saint-Laurent, C. (in press a). Personal trajectories, collective memories. Remembering and the life-course. *Culture & Psychology*.

de Saint-Laurent, C. (in press b). Trajectories of resistance and historical reflections. In N. Chaudhary, G. Marsico, P. Hviid, & J. Villadsen (Eds.), *Resistance in Everyday Life: Constructing Cultural Experiences*. Singapore: Springer.

de Saint-Laurent, C. (2014). "I would rather be hanged than to agree with you!": Collective Memory and the Definition of the Nation in Parliamentary Debates on Immigration. *Outlines. Critical Practice Studies*.

de Saint-Laurent, C. (2015). Dialogue and debate in psychology: Commentary on the foundational myth of psychology as a science. In J. Cresswell, A. Haye, A. Larrain, M. Morgan, & G. Sullivan (Eds.), *Dialogue and debate in the making of theoretical psychology* (pp. 231–239). Ontario.

de Saint-Laurent, C., & Zittoun, T. (in press). Memory in life transitions. In B. Wagoner (Ed.), *Handbook of memory and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Favero, P. (2010). Italians, the "Good People": Reflections on National Self-Representation in Contemporary Italian Debates on Xenophobia and War. *Outlines. Critical Practice Studies*, *12*(2), 138–153.

Glaveanu, V. P. (2014). *Thinking through Creativity and Culture: Toward an Integrated Model* (1 edition). New Jersey, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

James, W. (1922). *Pragmatism: a new name for some old ways of thinking*. New York and London: Longmans, Green and Co.

Nicholson, C. (2016). The role of historical representations in Israeli-Palestinian relations: Narratives from abroad. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, *22*(1), 5–11. https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000143

Pierce, C. S. (1877). The Fixation of belief. *Popular Science Monthly*, *12*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.7135/UPO9780857286512.036

Rosenstein, A. (2014). *Décris-Ravage*. Théâtre Océan Nord.

Rosenthal, G. (1993). Reconstruction of life stories : principles of selection in generating stories for narrative biographical interviews. *The Narrative Study of Lives*, *1*(1), 59–91.

Valsiner, J. (2014). Needed for cultural psychology: Methodology in a new key. *Culture & Psychology*, *20*(1), 3–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X13515941

Wertsch, J. (2002). *Voices of collective remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wertsch, J., & Batiashvili, N. (2012). Mnemonic communities and conflict: Georgia's narrative template. In I. Marková & A. Gillespie (Eds.), *Trust and Conflict: Representation, culture and dialogue*. London and New York: Routledge.

Zittoun, T. (2006). *Transitions: Development Through Symbolic Resources*. Greenwich: Information Age Publishing.

Zittoun, T. (2012). Lifecourse: A Socio-Cultural Perspective. In J. Valsiner (Ed.), *The Handbook of Culture and Psychology* (pp. 513–535). New York: Oxford University Press.